

ASPECTS OF THE RHETORIC OF SOUTH AFRICAN NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP ANNO 1992

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Abstract

Towards the end of the era of fixation on textimmanent approaches (such as structuralism, reading the New Testament as literature, et cetera) which characterized South African New Testament scholarship during the 70's and 80's, more and more voices could be heard complaining that - because of these approaches - New Testament scholarship has become irrelevant within the political, ecclesiastical and even theological, contexts of South Africa. In 1992 two collections of essays, dealing respectively with the ethics and the theology of (almost) all the books in the New Testament, were published. Most of the prominent New Testament scholars in the country contributed to these collections of essays. Both were written shortly after the fundamental process of change in South Africa swung into motion at the beginning of 1990. Thus one could expect to find the reaction of South African New Testament scholarship to these events in these two collections. In this article aspects of the rhetoric of these collections of essays are analyzed. In particular the question is asked: do these essays witness the development of a 'grammar' in terms of which South African New Testament scholarship can argue in a socially and theologically relevant manner within the changing South African context?

1. Introduction

To use the word 'rhetoric' has become fashionable in New Testament scholarship and thus sometimes also meaningless (partly due to the long history of rhetoric, the wide scope of rhetoric and the significant differences in the usage of the term during different eras of its long history). In this article 'rhetoric' is understood to mean persuasive argumentation in the public domain of human discourse and interaction (see Wuellner 1987; Schüssler Fiorenza 1988). Thus, not the rhetoric in or of the writings of the New Tes-

tament, but the rhetoric of (the dominant and most powerful group in) the guild of New Testament scholars in South Africa, specifically as could be witnessed in two recently published collections (on the rhetoric of scientific discourse, see Nelson, Megill and McCloskey 1987:3-18; Simmonds 1990:31 and Wuellner 1988). In other words: what did the guild 'say' or 'argue' in 1992 through its scholarly activities within the context of the academy, the church and society in general in South Africa?

This article more specifically deals with the following problem: does the methodological consensus that the theology or ethics of each New Testament book should be determined individually within the specific context of each book contribute to, or does it stand in the way of the development of a 'grammar' in terms of which South African New Testament scholars can argue effectively within the specific context of the early 90's? Do we find pointers of the development of such a 'grammar' in the two 1992 collections of South African New Testament scholarship?

2. South African New Testament scholarship anno 1992

During 1992 two remarkable books were published: at the beginning of the year the *Festschrift* for Andrie du Toit, *Teologie in konteks* (edited by J H Roberts, W S Vorster, J N Vorster and J G van der Watt) and at the end of the year *Geloof en opdrag. Perspektiewe op die etiek van die Nuwe Testament* (edited by C Breytenbach and B C Lategan).

These books are remarkable for a number of reasons (except for the fact that they were published in the same year):

- * both are collections (*versamelbundels*);
- * the list of contributors to each reads like a 'who's who' of South African New Testament scholars;
- * both books purposefully deal with all the writings of the New Testament (with the spin-off that often forgotten books, like the catholic epistles and Hebrews, are also being dealt with);
- * in both books a number of different authors deal with all the New Testament books individually;
- * both share an important methodological principle (stated explicitly in the introductions by the respective editors): each New Testament writing must be read individually in its specific context.
- * This methodological consensus makes it possible for different scholars to work individually, producing one article on an individual New Testament book - an ideal situation for a collection/*versamelbundel*. Even though the editors have given the contributors freedom to explore the theology or the ethics of a specific New Testament writing as they see fit, this shared methodological principle has important implications for how 'theology' and 'ethics' are in general conceptualized in these books.

Finally, on yet another level, these books are remarkable:

* Since the late 80's P G R de Villiers (1989) and D J Smit (1988, 1990a, 1990b, 1991) have criticized the scientist ethos of South African New Testament scholarship during the 70's and 80's (the heyday of structuralist and other text-immanent approaches). It is to my mind an important object for research to determine whether or not these objections have indeed contributed to a change in the ethos of South African New Testament scholarship, as witnessed in these two collections (*versamelbundels*).

* Between the late 80's (when De Villiers and Smit sounded their criticism) and the writing and publication of the essays in the *versamelbundels*, lies the important event of February 1990, with all its implications for the South African society. Yet another important object for research is to explore whether or not this significant event indeed influences what is done in South African New Testament scholarship, or is it the same as with Bultmann, who once remarked that the coming and going of the Second World War had no effect at all on what he was doing in his New Testament Scholarship? (quoted by Schüssler Fiorenza 1988:11).

Although I am not going to deal directly and in any detail with any of these two important issues, they are directly responsible for the specific issue on which this article focuses, namely, do we find in these collections any development of a 'grammar' (or systemizations of the 'content' of the New Testament) in terms of which the guild argues during the early 1990's? More specifically, the critique of Dirkie Smit (1992) against *Geloof en opdrag* prompted me to investigate the possible development of a 'grammar' in these two collective works.

3. Smit's critique of South African New Testament scholarship for 'not going all the way' in its handling of the ethics of the New Testament

In his reaction to *Geloof en opdrag* Smit (1992:303-325) gives a long and insightful explanation of the difference between ethos and ethics, and he illustrates this distinction with reference to the debate on homosexuality in the Reformed Ecumenical Council. He argues that three aspects should be distinguished when dealing with the question how the Bible influences a debate like this:

* In the first place the Bible - as well as many other factors - influences people on an issue (like homosexuality) before they begin to reflect consciously on the issue. Conradie (1993) explains this with reference to Berger's concept of the social construction of reality: the Bible plays a significant role of the social construction of the reality within which a religious community lives and in that sense influences their views on issues even before they consciously reflect on a specific issue.

* Secondly, the Bible sometimes actually has an influence on how people (Christians) see a specific issue like this, once they begin to reflect consciously on it.

* Finally, presuppositions, facts and convictions about which the Bible can not and does not say anything (such as whether homosexuality is due to genetic features - like having blue or brown eyes and about which nobody can do anything, or whether it is culturally conditioned behaviour) play a very important role. In fact, in many cases these presuppositions, facts and convictions play the definitive role in how people deal with an issue like homosexuality.

By means of these categories and its illustration Smit comes to the conclusion that

* nobody can practice ethics by using only the Bible;

* biblical ethics (if such a thing does exist) is not equal to Christian ethics - the relationship between them is indirect and complex.

In the light of these conclusions he criticizes *Geloof en opdrag* on a number of points:

* Who is the audience of this book (1992:317)? He holds that it does not succeed in its ideal to be of real service to the theological community in South Africa, neither for 'ordinary people' nor for theologians of other disciplines, since it does not engage into any real debate with ethicists and systematic theologians. In the final instance books represent an in-house debate and the audience of the books is limited to other New Testament scholars.

* Using Hays' (1990) three dimensions of the task of an ethicist (descriptive, synthetic and hermeneutic) he maintains that (i) the book succeeds excellently in the first dimension, that (ii) the second dimension is almost totally absent (except for two contributions and a few remarks in passing by two other contributors) and that (iii) dimension three is either not being dealt with at all, or (because of the lack of dimension two) in a haphazard manner by moving in a simplistic manner from the situation of the New Testament writings to (perceived analogical) situations of the current South African context. In this process the methods used by many contributors are arbitrarily and totally subjective and some of the situation analyses are very uninformed and even naive.

The core of Smit's argument is that as good and masterful as South African New Testament scholars' reading of the first century context is, as '*ongelooftlik skraal, bloedarmoedig en onstellend wêreldvreemd*' is their reading of our current reality and of life. Let me mention in passing : interestingly enough, Deist 1992:314) expresses similar sentiments regarding South African Old Testament scholarship:

We are able archaeologists, historians, sociologists of religion, literary critics, textual critics and the rest, but poor *theologians*. Doctoral dis-

sertations on the Old Testament seldom, if ever, reflect on the *theological* implications of research results.

In order to offer any significant contribution to the ethos of Christians in South Africa and to Christian ethics, Smit suggests that South African New Testament scholars will have to

- * read the work of systematic theologians, missiologists and ethicists (to be able to engage in really meaningful debate with them), and
- * learn to read our current South African context in a more sound and responsible way.

It is not the purpose of this paper to enter into debate with Smit on all the issues he has raised. I agree with his assumption that some form of systemization of the 'content' of the New Testament, that is, its 'theology' and its 'ethics', is necessary in order to be able to 'say' something, that is, to be able to argue persuasively within the current South African context. Why are South African New Testament scholars reluctant to write about theology and ethics, or why is it, that when they do so, a systematic theologian and ethicist like Smit reacts so critically? One way to look for an answer to this question is by analyzing what South African New Testament scholars in the two collective works of 1992 say when they write about theology and ethics. However, I want to argue that the real reason for this seemingly unsuccessful conversation between New Testament scholars and systematic theologians is the current methodological consensus in South African New Testament scholarship, and its implications. These two themes will be our concern in the next two sections.

4. New Testament 'theology' and New Testament 'ethics'

4.1 Definitions or descriptions of 'theology' in *Teologie in konteks*

One would expect from a book with the word 'theology' in its title some or other definition or description of this concept. The editors do not give such a definition in their preface except for observing that both 'context' and 'theology' are defined by the different contributors in different ways. The aim of this investigation is to determine (i) whether or not theology is defined by each contributor and (ii) whether a contributor works with context in the sense of the historical (or rhetorical) context in which the New Testament writing originated, (iii) whether context is (also) understood as co-text, resulting in a text-immanent approach, and (iv) whether or not the contributors made any explicit reference to the possible meaning and implications of his/her description of the book's theology for our current South African context.

R indicates that the contributor defines context specifically as 'rhetorical situation'.

| Contributor | Defines 'theology' | Ancient context | Textual Co-text | Modern SA context |
|--------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Combrink | + | - | ++ | - |
| W.S. Vorster | ++ | + | + | -- |
| Scheffler | + | + | -+ | + |
| Van der Watt | - | + | + | - |
| Joubert | - | + | + | -+ |
| J N Vorster | + | +R | + | - |
| Malan | - | -+ | + | - |
| Pelser | - | -+ | + | - |
| Kruger | - | - | + | -+ |
| Pretorius | + | +R | + | - |
| Roberts | + | + | + | -+ |
| Van Aarde | - | + | - | - |
| Lategan | - | + | + | - |
| Botha | ++ | + | + | + |
| Theron | - | + | + | - |
| Gräbe | -+ | - | -+ | - |
| Van Zyl | -+ | + | + | - |
| Kotzé | - | + | + | - |
| Lombard | - | +R | + | ++ |
| Hartin | - | - | + | - |
| Domeris | - | + | + | - |
| Nortjé | - | + | - | - |
| du Randt | - | + | + | - |
| du Rand | + | + | + | - |

Hendrikus Boers is not a South African, and interestingly enough, he is the only one who writes about the New Testament canon. The contribution of Lambrechts (Leuven) is also not considered here.

Ten of the twenty four contributors (41%) thus offer a definition or description or some form of reflection on the concept 'theology' in this book with the title *Teologie in konteks*. These definitions/descriptions of theology are:

* Combrink (1991:1): begins his article with the remark that it is not necessary to give an elaborate description of theology and refers to Ridderbos on the theology of the New Testament. He goes on, however, to say that a redaction critical is not the only valid way of dealing with the theology of Matthew. In fact, a modern literary approach which operates on the basis of the wholeness or integrity of the narrative may prove more fruitful for delineating the shape of Matthean theology than methods which seek to isolate Matthean redaction.

* W S Vorster (1991:33-34): Mark is not a theologian in the modern philosophical sense of the word. The gospel of Mark deals with a *res* narrated from theological perspective. This *res* is the fact that Jesus Christ was, according to the story, the suffering Son of God and this had certain implications for the people for whom Mark wrote this story. It is in this sense that one can talk about a theology of Mark: theology in narrated form. The reason for the double negative in the assessment of W S Vorster's contribution on the modern South African context is the fact that Vorster (1991:57-58) explicitly states that a political or materialist reading of Mark (currently a very popular kind of reading) 'doen die teks geweld aan'. According to him the only thing we can do with Mark in our context is to follow him and re-tell the story of Jesus within our own context. As is the case with Mark, Christians who come after us will also say that we and our story of Jesus should be understood within our context. The implication is that our re-telling must be something totally different than simply repeating the story of Mark and still find it plausible. Vorster (1991:58) maintains that:

Toe Markus die tradisie neergeskryf het, het hy die tradisie laat stol. Dit het in 'n groot mate die kreatiwiteit van die verteller(s) hokgeslaan. Vandaar dat daar vandag soveel erns gemaak word van Markus as 'n preekbundel sonder om in ag te neem dat Markus se Jesus toe nooit, soos hy verwag het, spoedig gekom het nie. Sy boodskap was nietemin 'n sterk oorredende boodskap vir mense wat in nood verkeer het en angste beleef het oor die val van Jerusalem en die oorlog teen die Romeine.

* Scheffler (1991:62): The 'theology' of Luke is not theology in the modern sense of the word. Rather it is to trace Luke's views on the most important issues about which he writes, namely, human suffering in a holistic sense (economic, social, political, physical, psychological, religious suffering). It is Luke's concern to write a gospel reflecting the response of Jesus to this suffering and Jesus' attempt to stop this suffering - not only through God and through Jesus, but also through the conduct of the readers amongst whom Luke tries to create sympathy for the sufferers.

* J N Vorster (1991:157): theological themes are statements (*uitsprake*) about God within the specific rhetorical context of the letter to the Romans. There is no underlying theological concept (*grondgedagte*). Theological coherence is determined by the context of the letter. Paul's theological views

and statements are relational and pastoral: he is concerned with the relations between groups and with care for a specific group (the rights of the gentile Christians *vis-à-vis* the Jews).

* Pretorius (1991:283) (with reference to Roberts): the different themes in the letters of Paul find their coherency in a 'theological centre' which is neither identical with one single theme nor with the sum of all the themes. The nucleus of Paul's teaching (theology) is his fundamental concern for what God does in history in Christ through the Holy Spirit for the salvation of human beings.

* Roberts (1991:295): the argument of the letter is not the theology of the letter. The argument is carried by a whole set of theological insights unique to the author. The manner in which the argument develops makes a specific theological contribution. By analyzing this the typical theology of the letter, in this case the unique theology of Colossians, can be described. The theological '*speerpunt*' underpinning the argument is a warning to remain bonded with Christ since he as Head is the only and sufficient worker of salvation (*Heilbewerker*) (1991:316).

* Botha (1991:385): it is remarkable that the writings of the New Testament play a very small role in our conceptualizing of God. No comprehensive or penetrating study of the theme 'God in the New Testament' exists. New Testament scholars often presume that much of what the New Testament says about God is 'conventional' Jewish piety or is to be considered a radical revision of that piety. The question of God only emerges in New Testament studies in reconstructions of Jesus' kingdom preaching or in the development of Christology. Even in New Testament Christology New Testament scholars often treat the information as if we already know what is meant by 'God'. In the case of the Pastorals almost no attention is given to the picturing of God. It is, however, '*oordrewe en misleidend*' to write a 'theology' of a single (and very short text) such as 2 Timothy. But, says Botha (1991:386), he is convinced that a specific and one-sided focus will contribute to insight in the '*rykdom, omvang en geskakeerdheid*' of the early Christian documents.

* Gräbe (1991:427): Paul is not a dogmatic theologian. He is an interpreter of the gospel. His concern is to explain the consequences of the Jesus-event. The gospel is for Paul '*Gleichzeitigkeit mit Jesus Christus*'. The letter to Philemon is one of Paul's specific concretizations of the gospel and this is the background for the attempt to describe the theological nuances of this letter.

* Van Zyl (1991:433): The 'theological profile' of the addressees of Hebrews is the 'faith perspective' of these people within their concrete historical situation. To describe their theological profile is to describe how they defined themselves theologically in order to make sense of their situation and to develop a broader perspective on what it means to be the faithful people of God in a world full of pressures on the followers of Jesus. How must a Christian see him/herself in the eyes of God in order to be able to survive as

Christian in the world? Hebrews offers an important contribution for the description of the theological profile of the Christian.

* Du Rand (1991:582): the book Revelation is a communicative reflection by means of theological points of view and it stands within a particular relation to the social reality which it reflects. The language and theological message of Revelation should therefore be understood in terms of the possible social reality in which its original historical readers lived. The question is thus to determine what is communicated (=the theological message) and also how this communication takes place (=narrator's point of view and use of language).

Although neither of the authors who does in fact reflect on the nature of theology, does so in any comprehensive manner (as could be expected since this was not the purpose of the book), I believe that we do find interesting pointers here which may perhaps indicate the development of a new biblical theology in South African New Testament scholarship. It must be emphasized, however, that all these authors deal only with the 'theology' of a single book in the New Testament and we do not find any talk about a theology of the New Testament. In the next section I will come back to this problem.

4.2 Definitions or descriptions of 'ethics' in *Geloof en opdrag*

In this section the same exercise is repeated with the book *Geloof en opdrag*. The aim of the investigation is to determine (i) whether or not ethics is defined by each contributor and (ii) whether a contributor works with context in the sense of the historical (or rhetorical) context in which the New Testament writing originated, (iii) whether context is (also or perhaps primarily) understood as co-text, resulting in a text-immanent approach, and (iv) whether or not the contributors made any explicit reference to the possible meaning and implications of his/her description of the book's ethics for our current South African context.

| Contributor | Defines 'ethics' | Ancient context | Textual Co-text | Modern SA context |
|--------------|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Combrink | + | -R | + | + |
| Breytenbach | - | ++ | + | - |
| Du Plessis | - | - | ++ | ++ |
| Scheffler | + | + | + | -+ |
| Van der Watt | + | - | ++ | - |
| J N Vorster | + | +R | + | - |
| Van Zyl | - | + | - | - |
| Lategan | + | +R | + | ++ |
| Pelser | - | - | + | - |
| Joubert | - | ++ | + | - |
| Pretorius | - | + | + | + |
| Wessels | - | + | - | ++ |
| De Villiers | - | + | - | - |
| Roberts | - | + | + | -+ |
| Du Toit | + | + | + | + |
| Hartin | - | + | + | ++ |
| Du Rand | - | + | + | -+ |

It is remarkable that in a book dealing with ethics only six of the seventeen contributors (35%) attempted to define or describe the concept. That is why Smit (1992:303-306) found it necessary to begin his response with an elaborate description of the concepts 'ethos' and 'ethics'. Most contributors simply assume that everybody knows what ethics is and carry on to analyze the 'ethical demands' or 'ethical guidelines' in different New Testament writings. However, six contributors do give explicit definitions or descriptions of 'ethics':

* Combrink (1992:3) (quoting Keck): the ethos of the community is a network of habits, values, expectations and the like which give the community profile; the ethics of a community is the rationale for the ethos. Matthew wants to develop his ethics with the ethos of a specific community in view and the specific and concrete problems in the ethos of this community. When deviations from the established ethos of the community occur, debate follows. Those issues accentuated by Matthew give an indication of the issues in debate. The description of these issues, therefore, is a description of the ethics of Matthew.

* Scheffler (1992:55): although it is possible that ethics may be formalized in terms of fixed regulations, this does not imply that ethics is merely prescriptions of these regulations. Ethics asks for the underlying values of individuals and groups, values whose purpose is to organize the conduct of individuals and groups. Thus, there exists an underlying attitude and motivation for that conduct deemed as preferable. This attitude guarantees that ethical principles are innovatively concretized in different contexts.

* Van der Watt (1992:74): 'Ethics' in this article is understood as the way in which a distinction is made between right and wrong deeds and the way these distinctions are motivated, as well as the practical conduct resulting from these distinctions and motivations.

* Vorster (1992:98): Instead of reading Romans in terms of the 'indicative-imperative' scheme, 'context' is the starting point for the article. If it is kept in mind that ethics or morality has to do with the question of the correct conduct or attitude within a particular situation, we move to the level of rhetoric. With context as starting point it will be argued that the 'ethics' of Romans could be described as a 'situation ethics', and more specifically, an 'ethics of conformation'.

* Lategan (1992:132): Ethics as seen from the perspective of faith is not primarily to know or to believe the correct things, but it is to do the correct things. Contrary to popular belief, Christian ethics do not consist of a list of do's and don't's. The real purpose of Christian ethics is to foster a specific attitude to life. This cannot be summarized in a set of rules, no matter how encompassing such a set of rules may be. In fact, the tendency in Christian ethics is to reduce this attitude to life to a minimum of starting points which are then concretized in each new situation. The Christian ethics is thus based on a *minima lex* rather than a *maxima lex*. This explains the vivid and dynamic character of Christian ethics. It also explains why, in a time of transition and socio-economic change, uncertainty exists which causes renewed reflection on the implications and meaning of these minimum of basic ground rules.

* Du Toit (1992:260): With G Hoenicke ethics can be defined as 'die rechte Art des Christlichen Lebens'. Thus, ethics is the art of Christian life in its vertical and horizontal dimensions. In terms of this definition the dominant ethical focus of Hebrews can not be denied.

Roberts did not give any definition of ethics in his contribution to *Geloof en opdrag*. In his contribution to *Teologie in konteks*, however, he (1991:317) describes the ethical statements of Colossians as statements concerning the practical conduct in life of the faithful, their attitudes and choices concerning the powers that threatens them. It concerns their individual choices and attitudes in their interpersonal and intergroup relations as well their relation to the ecology (creation and cosmos).

Although an ethicist like Smit (1992) makes it clear that he is by no means satisfied with this '*bloedarmoedige*' treatment of the concept 'ethics', I submit that perhaps we do find in this book the beginnings of the development of a Biblical ethics in South African New Testament scholarship. But once again, at this stage it is explicitly limited to the ethics of individual New Testament books and most explicitly does not pretend to be a comprehensive New Testament ethics or biblical ethics.

The point which Smit so forcefully makes is that unless South African New Testament scholarship moves beyond the theology or ethics of individual New Testament books to a theology or ethics of the New Testament (and the Bible), our colleagues in other theological disciplines (as well as the church public in general) will continue to experience our work as an in-house debate which is not contextually relevant. However, even if we do agree with this contention of Smit, we are immediately confronted with a very serious methodological dilemma: the implications of what may be dubbed the current 'methodological consensus' in South African New Testament scholarship.

5. The methodological consensus in South African New Testament scholarship and its implications

In the introduction to *Teologie in konteks* the editors state that their purpose is

...om 'n bundel saam te stel wat die teologie van elke geskrif van die Nuwe Testament teken teen die situasie waaruit die verskillende geskrifte ontstaan het (Roberts *et al* 1992:i).

Likewise, the editors of *Geloof en opdrag* state in the introduction that their purpose is

... om 'n wetenskaplik verantwoordbare, maar maklik leesbare uiteensetting van die etiek van elk van die verskillende Nuwe-Testamentiese boeke in een bundel aan te bied.

In order to justify their claim for a '*wetenskaplik verantwoordbare*' book, they maintain that:

Dit impliseer dat die konteks waarbinne en waarvoor elke geskrif geskryf is, ernstig geneem sal word (Breytenbach & Lategan 1992:i).

In the light of these remarks of the editors as well as in the light of the fact that all the contributors produced papers dealing with individual New Testament books, it seems to be justified to say that - at least in this regard! - there exists a methodological consensus in the guild of South African New Testament scholars: each New Testament writing must be read individually in its own specific context if one wants to analyze its theology or the ethics. The major implication of this consensus reads with the cold logic of a syllogism:

- * contexts differ (major premise)
- * each book has its own context (minor premise)

* each book therefore tells its own (individual, different) story (*conclusio*).

Roberts (1992:241) formulates the impact of this methodological consensus as follows:

Binne die raamwerk van die vraag na die eenheid en verskeidenheid van die Nuwe-Testamentiese geskrifte, het die ondersoek na die unieke kommunikatiewe bydrae van elke geskrif in die lig van sy eie situasie, tans een van die opwindendste en boeiendste bedrywighede in die Bybelwetenskappe geword.

A few pages further he gives a prescriptive status to this methodological presupposition (1992:247):

Soos in die geval van die teologie van 'n skrywer of 'n boek, moet ook ten opsigte van die teologiese onderdele soos die etiek, konsekwent gewerk word vanuit die situasie waarin dit tot stand gekom het en die vraag na die kommunikasie wat die teks in daardie situasie tot stand wou bring.

This prescriptive mode seems to be an echo of a deep seated conviction, articulated by Roberts but, no doubt, shared by the overwhelming majority of South African New Testament scholars:

Waar die vraag na die situasie nie gevra word nie, bly die lees van 'n ernstige geskrif (soos dit in die geval van hierdie briewe geld) in vaaghede vasgevang - doodgewoon al omdat die leser nie vir homself (*sic!*) uitgemaak het wat die saak is waaroor die brief handel en waarop dit by wyse van antwoorde, bespreking of geselskap wil inspeel nie. Waar die kommunikatiewe situasie onduidelik is, bly ook die kommunikatiewe speerpunt/e vaag en kan die 'boodskap' wat die geskrif wil oordra, nie begryp word nie (Roberts 1991:294).

In a somewhat different context Botha (1993:53) expresses his concern that New Testament scholarship should focus on the ancient context with the following remark (note his use of absolutistic language):

Dit is 'n absolute vereiste vir Nuwe Testamentici om die Nuwe Testament as deel van die eerste-eeuse Mediterreense literêre corpus, *verweef* met Joodse, Hellenistiese en Gnostiese tradisies te verstaan.

This methodological consensus is the result of the development in the theory and methodology of New Testament studies during the last three decades (specifically the methodological 'explosion' which is so characteristic of South African New Testament scholarship): we have gone through a full circle from 'behind the text' to 'in the text' to 'in front of the text' and back to the 'text in context' - which, admittedly, is much more than the old 'behind the text' concern. The era of 'in front of the text' sharpened the awareness for the all-important meaning-constitutive influence of the modern day interpreter's context and by doing that, it sharpens once again the awareness of

constitutive role of the ancient context. If the context of the interpreter is so important, then the ancient context of the text must be also of overriding importance if one hopes to discern the meaning and significance of these texts. Precisely this caused a renewed interest in the ancient context of the New Testament writings - this time around being dealt with in a very sophisticated way in terms of various modern sociological and anthropological methods and models (see Elliott 1986), as well as with the help of modern tools of investigation such as the computer. Although not necessarily sharing in all cases the ideals of the historical-critical paradigm (for that South African New Testament scholarship is methodologically too deeply influenced by modern epistemological developments as well as by modern literary theory - see Vorster 1984a), the demand to be 'scientific' seems to lure South African New Testament scholarship to focus again - and almost exclusively - on the first century contexts of the New Testament writings. And precisely this fact causes the guild's readings of the New Testament not to be of immediate interest for people outside the guild, which, on its turn, confirms the critique of Smit that South African New Testament scholarship is not socially relevant.

The in-house debate, however, is not unrelated to developments in our society at large. Put in another way: the social history of South African New Testament scholarship is not unrelated to the social history of South Africa in recent times [see Botha (1992); see also Georgi's (1992) interesting analysis of the social history of biblical criticism in terms of the interest in Life of Jesus theology]. Let me elaborate further on this: the in-house debate resulted in a consensus on the overriding importance of the context of the New Testament writings. Modern and very specialized (social and anthropological) methodology necessitates the importance to set the focus sharply. The context of 1 Peter, for example, differs significantly from the context of Colossians. Since context in an important sense constitutes meaning, one inevitably has to work with each New Testament writing individually. Since they were only much later - and in totally different contexts - collected, these collections of books have meanings other than those of the books individually. In fact, the all-important concept of 'context' immediately becomes almost inconceivably problematic when one deals with collections of writings which originated from different contexts. Context functions in totally different ways in the case of the initial communication situation of individual books and (later) collections of those books. It becomes a very complex issue. It is already complicated enough to attempt to (re)construct a context for individual writings originating from times and cultures and places so remote as those of the New Testament. How much more complicated does it become to (re)construct contexts for the collections in terms of which the collections got their meaning! It is therefore clear that to do this and thus, to develop a 'theology' or an 'ethics' of collections (e.g. Pauline epistles, or the New Testament as a whole), is an additional step to take. The ideal that such a theology or ethics of the collection has to build on the readings-in-context of the individual writings, still has to be realized.

Smit criticizes South African New Testament scholarship for not taking this additional step. The problem seems to be that it is not so easy to define the 'nature' of the New Testament: the nature of each writing, originating in different context, compels New Testament scholars to take that context serious and thus deal with the writings individually. But these writings are today only relevant since they are part of the New Testament canon (and the Bible, for that matter). For example, there does not exist an International Society for the Study of Josephus with six thousand members as is the case with the Society of Biblical Literature, neither are there so many thousands of Josephus professors in the world as there are New Testament professors. Therefore, is it not a disregard for 'the nature' of the New Testament writings not to read them also (or even in the first place?) as a collection, as the book of the church, and as canon (with all the uncomfortable implications of normativity et cetera implied by the concept of canon)?

It seems as if the demands of our modern South African context as interpreters of the New Testament (academics in other theological disciplines, the ordinary church people in South Africa, and South African society as a whole) are not willing to tolerate any longer only an in-house debate in South African New Testament scholarship (see Van Zyl 1992). What our context demands from us is 'theology' or 'ethics' of the New Testament as a whole or of the Bible as a whole - precisely that which we are reluctant to do, given our methodological consensus.

On the other hand, the fact that we do have two recent books trying to describe the 'theology' and the 'ethics' of New Testament writings (be that at this stage the writings individually), is already a major step into a new direction - compared to the heyday of the methodological explosion in the 70's and 80's when one could hardly find (respectable) South African New Testament scholars talking at all about New Testament theology or ethics. This move (even though it is limited to individual books) is, in the case of *Teologie in konteks*, the result of Andrie du Toit's often expressed ideal that New Testament scholars should again take up the challenge of a New Testament or a biblical theology - this time in the light of and after the methodological explosion. In another sense this move is the result of the demands of our South African political and social situation. This situation has prompted Breytenbach to edit more than one book on the message the New Testament could have for our context, culminating in *Geloof en opdrag* (see also Breytenbach 1987, 1988).

The demands of in-house methodological considerations and even the new consensus of South African New Testament scholarship seemingly stands in a tension with the demands of our situation - a situation of social transition in a society consisting of 66% Christians (in terms of the 1991 census, TBVC-countries excluded) for whom the New Testament (the Bible) is an important book. The two sides of this tension is

* the abuse of the Bible in certain contextual theologies or ideologies (such as *apartheid* and certain exponents of liberation theology) on the one hand and the implications of methodological presuppositions in New Testament scholarship (dating back to the *Aufklärung*) (see R H Fuller 1989) on the other hand, makes many New Testament scholars sceptical to the point of disregarding altogether the possibility that the New Testament can have any meaning today in contextual issues;

* theologians in other disciplines, people in the church and even society at large, however, seems to be not interested in ancient books for their own sake - that's why we do not have a vibrant 'South African Society for the Study of Josephus' with many professors being paid by our universities and the South African tax payers. These people are interested in the New Testament because it is a religious book which, in a variety of ways, plays a role in the personal lives of people as well as in the church and in general societal issues. Therefore these people want to learn what the message and content of the New Testament is and more important: they want to know what it says for them today, here and now.

Smit's point is that, in order to be able to 'say' something (or, as I would like to put it, in order to be able to argue persuasively) a certain systemization of the 'content' (the theology and the ethics) of the New Testament is necessary. If South African New Testament scholars are not providing for this need, life will go on - without New Testament scholars.

The legitimate scepticism of New Testament scholars in the light of the role which the Bible has played/is still playing in South African society (see Vorster 1983, 1984b), might thus (ironically) land us without a job! We become irrelevant and disposable because we do not deal with contextual issues, or rather, our work and research do not significantly contribute to the needs of our society. It is simply not good enough to argue any longer that 'the needs of society' may be disregarded at the university since universities deal with universal matters of the mind and the development of humanity's general pool of knowledge. Impressive as these ideals may be, in South Africa they are an unaffordable luxury and we will end up without a job.

This means that we as guild should reformulate the exigence for our argumentation and adapt our rhetoric accordingly.

6. Conclusion

I realize that this article is largely an analysis of a problem that has already been pointed out by different people on different occasions. In order to move beyond analysis towards constructive suggestions, I believe that we need to investigate a number of issues, such as:

* the New Testament as book of the church and/or the New Testament as book of the university;

- * the implications of seeing the New Testament as book of the church - in particular the implications of the New Testament being a fourth century collection of first century books;
- * the implications of studying the New Testament as book of the university;
- * the audience of a scholarly community in South Africa: the interaction between (i) other New Testament scholars as audience, (ii) the broader university community as audience and (ii) society at large as audience;
- * the implications of the challenge to become engaged in meaningful debate with colleagues in other theological disciplines;
- * the implications of the challenge to become competent 'readers' of our current South African context.

At this stage three forums for the debate on these issues are immanent or in the process of development:

- * some of the papers in preparation for the 1994 Annual Meeting of the New Testament Society of South Africa will focus specifically on these issues;
- * the newly established sub-group of the NTSSA 'Rhetoric and Religion' has many of these issues on its immediate agenda;
- * the to-be-established South African Academy for Religion (SAAR) will create an context for this important interdisciplinarity debate.

As part of this debate we also need to reflect on the ethical issue at stake in this tension between the implications of the 'methodological consensus' and the needs of our situation and its implications for South African New Testament scholarship: is it ethically responsible not to take the implications of the historical situatedness of the new Testament serious in our interpretive acts? On the other hand, is it ethically responsible (and accountable to South African taxpayers!) in our South African context of the 90's to read these New Testament texts exclusively in their first century context? Both the complexity and the urgency of these seemingly contradictory responsibilities call for renewed and ongoing research and reflection.

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